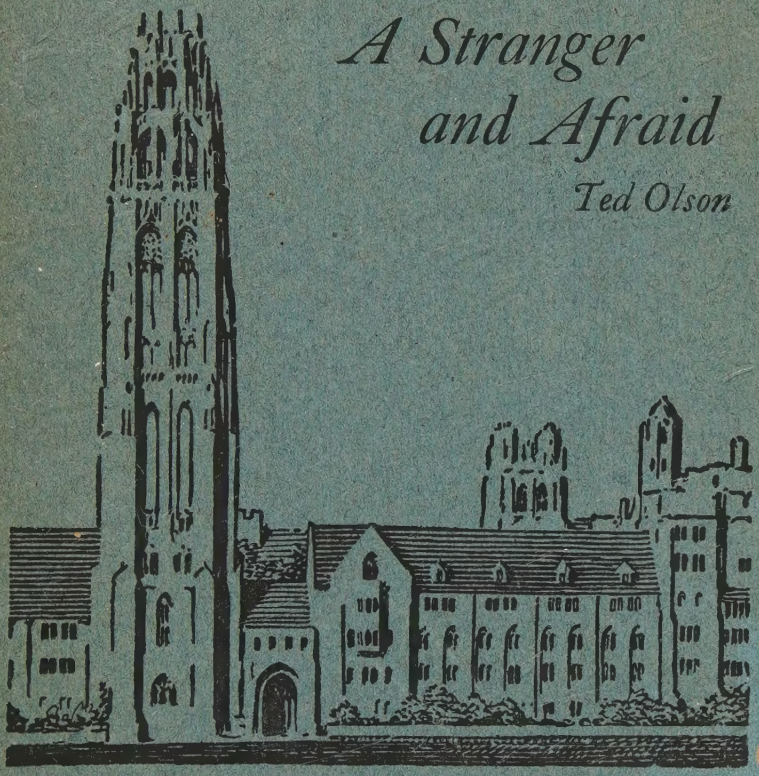
THE YALE SERIES

A Stranger and Afraid

Ted Olson



OF YOUNGER POETS

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PUBLISHER'S NOTE.

THE *Yale Series of Younger Poets is designed to afford a publishing medium for the work of young men and women who have not yet secured a wide public recognition. It will include only such verse as seems to give the fairest promise for the future of American poetry—to the development of which it is hoped that the Series may prove a stimulus. Communications concerning manuscripts should be addressed to the Editor of the Yale Series of Younger Poets, in care of the Yale University Press, New Haven, Connecticut.*

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A Stranger and Afraid

TED OLSON

"And how am I to face the odds
Of man's bedevilment and God's?
I, a stranger and afraid
In a world I never made."

HOUSMAN

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I. COLOR OF DUST

WORDS TO BE GRAVEN ON SANDSTONE.

Not with a snarl of bronze and a crackle of drums,
Not as a clean blade clips a cord asunder,
Nor in such other forthright guise death comes
To quench the flame and plough the compost under.
Rather we die in ways obscure and little.
I am less man this hour than yesterday;
More than I shall be soon. The slow years whittle,
With rusty knives, body and brain away.

Some day above these bones, a granite lie,
My unimportant name may stand in stone.
Fools, I have died these decades past, and I
Am ash in tombs unnumbered and unknown,
Spoil of the seas, prey to the wind's dissection,
Scattered too far for any resurrection.

IN OUR OWN IMAGE.

There are no gods. Apollo—Ashtoreth—
Are dead. And which of you has mind or sinew
To hew new deities and lend them breath
Out of the dark, insurgent fire within you?
Time was when men had power to create
Gods ribald, arrogant, and crudely great;
Gods thewed and cuirassed for supernal war—
Baal, Osiris, Thor!
Ours is a race too lean of wit to swell
Mythology with one red, lusty hell!
Godless we go, immune to shame or grief
That Jahveh and proud Lucifer as well
Died of our unbelief.

LAZARUS.

BETTER had I never known
Christ's word, the lifted stone,
Who now must face a second time
The darkness and the slime.

Better had my sisters prayed
Vainly for the young Lord's aid,
And never seen, as now they must,
Love throttled twice by dust.

Lord, they are sorry benisons
You lay upon your chosen ones,
That they alone beneath the sky
Must twice lose, and twice die.

SUMMARY FOR THE DEFENSE.

BORN to a world already past its prime;
Born wiser than is good for men to be
Who totter on a crumbling ledge of time
Above the mad grin of eternity;
Born, too, a little tired . . . O yeoman folk,
Judge us not all too harshly that we bend
Indifferent shoulders to your jealous yoke,
And care not much how road or furrow end.

And if our tongues are cruel with disdain
Of all your faiths, forgive us; it is only
The envious malignance of our pain,
Who have no faith, and cringe, naked and lonely,
Fueling flesh to dull the wind of reason . . .
Flesh will requite us well, and in good season.

HYPOTHESIS.

A long time ago, I think,
God scribbled this universe
Across a random scrap of infinity;
Paused midway for lack of ink,
And, in the slovenly way of Divinity,
Let it go for better or worse.

Now and then
God picks it up again.
(Earth, I think, is a period
Or a semicolon's half, or the dot
On an *i*. Not that it matters.)
And God
Pores for a minute or two at best
Over the dog-eared palimpsest,
And muses: "I wrote this, I know, but what
I meant it to be I've quite forgot.

"I'll have to get rid of this rubbish soon.
It will make a bonfire some afternoon."

COLOR OF DUST.

I.

Now I have learned this much at twenty-five:
That one may ring this world as does the sun
And find no land, nor any word of one,
Where there is wit or worth in being alive.
Well though he plan, and cunningly contrive,
The broth was brewed long since, the web was spun,
And he will have, until his days be done,
Sorrow to nurse him, bitterness to wive.

So it is here, and so in Samarkand.
Troy knew it so, and he is mad or blind
Who dreams it otherwise in any place.
I sought romance on many an alien strand.
I found instead, as every man must find,
Dearth at each hearthstone, doom on every face.

II.

There is a glory in Northumbrian hills.
There is a charm on Macedonian lakes.
Yet in a flicker of breath the chalice breaks
And the tart amber ichor of beauty spills
Into the dust. A passionate hour distills
Life's wine to one rich draft. The dreamer slakes
His need—quaffs of oblivion—and awakes
To the dark travail of his own warring wills.

This is the curse: that ever a man must come
Back to himself—himself—past love, past vision
That are but phantoms woven by the sun
In a barred room.
It is not Byzantium
I seek, but some far place where the shrill derision
Of self will follow no more. And there is none.

III.

So it is wiser to live as others do—
Straitly, with temperate tread and cunning eye;
Loving no thing too much, for loved things die;
Building no temples that the years may hew
Asunder. Toil will get you gold, and you
Can buy with riches many a glowing lie
To warm you: music, pictures, and the shy,
Sweet madness of poetry, loveliest, most untrue!

All lovely things are lies, in mockery fashioned,
Yet valiant and audacious falsehoods: God,
And immortality, and pattern, and song.
Treasure them craftily, that, duly rationed,
They may eke out this wearisome period
Before the dark—and may it not be long.

WE SHALL GO LAUGHING.

WHAT idiot god
Brought this mad marriage to fruition here—
Mismating flame and clod?
What howls of obscene mirth
Blew down the gusty corridors of time
When on the gray flanks of the cooling earth
The chemic slime
Stirred with a motion that was not the sea's,
Stirred through the drab leagues of the primal fen
Remote and far,
Stirred impotently, blindly—aye, awoke!
And with the urge of being even then
Racking it to a strange unease,
(O Idiot Demiurge, your master stroke!)
Stretched out a microscopic tentacle
To snare a star!

O Idiot-Jester—God
Iniquitous and cruel and abhorred—
I fling you back your laughter—I,
Flame-fretted clod,
One who has learned the true iniquity
Of that gargantuan jest in earth's red morn;
One who is torn
Almost to death by wars
Of fire and slime;
One who has found it vain to clutch at stars,
But is not reconciled
To the primordial mute oblivion.
(How can flame be content
To be drawn back into the sun,
Having been individual, sentient?
How can clod
Sink to the primal darkness whence it came,
Having once fused with flame?)

And yet, O Jester-God,
I laugh!
At you—at earth, your plaything—at my own
Foul heritage of slime.
From my own weakness I have beaten out
A weapon that shall strike you from your throne
And put your tyranny to rout.
I laugh!
And down the gusty corridors of time
Wind of your doom is blowing.
This is the vengeful harvest of your sowing.
You mated flame and slime.
Now has the clod
Found courage and a voice.
He laughs!
Dust mocks the god
That made it—and the god shall fall!
And for a little time
The echo of that devastating mirth
Shall blow tumultuously across the earth,
Rousing all things to revel and rejoice,
And we shall half forget
The foul, abysmal secret of our birth;
Forget that we are slime.

Aye, to the last dim flickering of the flame
That dwindles even now;
When the eternal frost draws tight its net
To strangle this half-conscious clod we tread,
We shall go laughing back into the dread
Dark ordure whence we came,
Fearless, unhesitant, ironic, proud
That we, who are but slime, can stand at last
Erect, unbowed.
That when our little hour is past
We can go laughing . . .

II. PEOPLE OF NO IMPORTANCE

PAYMENT IN FULL.

So much he wrested from this miser land:
A meadow plot, a square of furrowed loam,
And the forlorn, weed-cancered waste where stand
The rotting timbers that were once his home;
These, and a decade's harvests—wheat and hay
To feed his meager stock—not over much.
One stack remains, so black now with decay
Even the elk marauders will not touch.

Surely the drab years' dearth, the toil, the ache
Of sleepless war with hail and drouth and blight
One might have deemed were fee enough to make
This trivial ledger entry read aright.
Not so; the usurer land does not relent.
It has his bones at last. It is content.

TRANSIENT.

We wondered, even while we jested
On tramps grown reticent and aloof,
Why he so urgently requested
The naked room beneath the roof.

True, there were gulfs of emerald distance
Beyond the window. But the heat
Throbbed with an anvil's iron insistence
And night was sly with rodent feet.

He merely shrugged aside our warning.
"Don't bother; I shan't mind," he said.
We understood, too late, next morning,
How little he minded. He was dead.

When there's no cure in tears or laughter
Any room will serve man's use
If there be only beam or rafter
Round which to fix the noose.

COPYREADER.

This, then, had been his destiny from birth—
To desiccate life's pageant to a phrase—
Pity and terror, hunger, madness, mirth
Congealed in "Man Shoots Five in Murder Craze."
He'd written poems once. He wrote no more.
His wits had chilled in stereotypes too long
To kindle now one glittering metaphor.
His pulse kept time to headlines, not to song.

It was a sorry business, none knew better,
And there were moments he was more than half
Persuaded to shrug loose the ultimate fetter . . .
Save that he knew too well his epitaph,
And somehow could not stomach quite the crass
Brutality of "Scribe Ends Life with Gas."

MAKESHIFT.

Not his first love, nor last, was she who bore
His name now. Yet he would not have her guess
That it was less of love than loneliness
Had brought him tardily suppliant to her door.
Penurious years had taught him to be more
Frugal than once—content with something less
Than the consummate bliss he must confess
He counted now but myth or metaphor.

Yet, lacking love, he gave good counterfeit
In tenderness, forever vigilant lest
Gesture or glance might lead her to surmise
The counterfeit. He envied her a bit
Her greater ardor—and he never guessed
She also might have wished things otherwise.

A SMALL-TOWN PORTRAIT.

An old man like a gnarled and rusty spike,
A fog of ill-kempt beard around his throat,
Lean shoulders humped beneath a fusty coat,
Malignant eyes, head poised as if to strike
With shrewd, reptilian swiftness; and a tongue
That could be suave and buttery at will,
But in a moment's passion woke to shrill,
Fluoric spite, venemous, foul as dung.

"They hate me—don't I know!" he used to say.
"Hate and be damned, the whole self-righteous pack!
I know the law. I make the jackals pay
For every sneer and slur behind my back."
We cursed him; aye,—and had we dared confess,
Admired the courage of his wickedness.

TWO UNLAMENTED.

Be not afraid. There can be no ghosts here.
There are no ghosts where love has never been.
Lift the latch boldly, firmly, and go in.
Dust will companion you, but have no fear
Of shadowy hands on yours, of eyes that peer
Shyly from long-shut casements, of the thin,
Far tinkle of a ghostly mandolin
Chording the ghostly tunes of yesteryear.

No ghosts are here. No furtive shade survives
Two who were dust before their years were done,
Too pale of blood for saintliness or sin.
They lie in graves as narrow as their lives,
One with the mire, who never before were one.
There are no ghosts where love has never been.

GENESIS XXXIX.

WHEN the chill ate his marrow, and the Nile
Chuckled obscenely at his prison wall,
When the rat's nuzzling set his flesh acrawl,
And darkness was a slimy thing and vile,
Her memory burned in Joseph, and her smile
Was salt upon his wounds, who must recall
Always, without surcease or interval,
Her sorcery, her beauty, and her guile.

He had foregone the ardor of her lips
For vermin kisses. He had turned away
From lotus arms to keep an empty vow.
And to what end? His honor in eclipse,
Fetters, the lash, oblivion, and decay.
. . . "Indeed," said Joseph, "I'd be wiser now."

CRUSADER.

THERE is no truce for you. You must go on,
Stumbling, sweat-blinded, desperate, and alone.
You will have husks for bread; for bed, a stone.
You will lie cowering, nuzzled by a spawn
Of slimy terrors. Dawn will follow dawn
And bring no surcease—only a challenge, blown
From taunting distances; frost at the bone;
Snow-murk, wind-smother—and the dim trail gone.

This is your destiny. Your blood and tears
Will mark the grim way upward to the pass.
Eden you seek, or Arcady. Yet who knows?
Will the dark irony of the sullen years
Show you, at last, a stench of blind morass
And the white horror of uncharted snows?

BLIZZARD.

The wolves of the wind at his heels, the buzzard wind
Wheeling over him, waiting to pick his bones—
This was the end, he guessed, and chuckled a bit
To find himself, at the end of all, still thinking
Incorrigibly in metaphors.
Strange, though,
For death to come so casually on him, after
All the sonorous phrases he had scribbled
Of its dark majesty: a balky motor
That mocked his tinkering, ever maladroit
At tools, or trade, or anything but words;
And then the sudden, sibilant, spiteful fury
Of snow—in April!
He should never have left
The car—thus wisdom told him, tardy as always.
Yet it had seemed that any fool might find
That homestead shack, with road and fence to guide him.
And then the fence had dwindled out, and with it
The road, and the snow thickened, bludgeoning, blinding him,
Hobbling his feet in a nightmare sloth. And soon
Sleep would come on him, the insidious,
Inexorable last sleep.
Strange how like life
The ending of it. Always the road lay plain
Under your feet, and you marched whistling on,
April in heart and heels. And then the first
Wet snowflake tongued your cheek, and suddenly
You found the sun was gone, and the road, and only
Sagebrush and rock, with little dunes of snow
Growing to leeward. What man could say surely
Where life went wrong?
He was no longer cold,
But Christ! how tired, tired! Why not lie down
One little minute—pretending not to know
That minute would be always? Oh, he'd heard
The musty, moral counsel: "Never lie down;
Never give up; go under fighting"—wrest

The ultimate possible inch of frayed existence
From the grim shears. So even dying, it seemed,
Had its conventions. Well, he'd flouted others,
Why not one final gesture?
God, how good
Was rest, just rest! Would men keep up the struggle
If they could guess? Fate was a wolf at your heels
And a buzzard wheeling above; but turn at last
And wolf and buzzard were gone, or never had been
Save in your egocentric terror. Fate
Was storm and tide and lightning, indifferent,
Inexorable, and aloof, and not concerned
In hounding you. And there was peace for wise men
Who learned as much.
No wolf-cry now on the wind—
No buzzard wings above him. Rather a music
Of mad, barbarian fiddles, and a spinning
Of dervish dancers. So his shabby years
Closed with a certain splendor after all.

How like the living of life was the leaving of it:
Blundering on to doom, as he had blundered
Since birth; the highway lost; the goal forgotten—
And yet incorrigibly finding beauty
Somewhere . . . somewhere . . . always . . .

III. TRINITY.

TRINITY.

WISDOM, I think, is made of these
Three discoveries:

First, the raw, incredible ache
Of a new heartbreak.

Bitter this—but bitterer far
Learning how brief all heartbreaks are,
When the hurt heals over and leaves no scar.

And last, that love full-feasted even
Is somewhat short of utter heaven.

Wisdom is wrought of these
Three certainties.

THE CITY IN THE SEA.

MEN say there was a town here long ago,
A tarnished buckle clasping sea and weald;
Though none remembers now, and none may know
What time, or how, the waters came and sealed
Market and church and hall in fluid jade.
But still, men say, when the loud norther swells,
From towers long since forgotten, but undecayed,
There comes a watery music as of bells.

Over the empty city in your heart
Pour the dark waters, merciful and opaque.
Build you new towers, and wage in stall and mart
A furious commerce for oblivion's sake.
No bruit of horns and wheels, of power and pride,
Can still the clamor of bells beneath the tide.

TIME HAS A WAY.

Time has a way with flesh that is more cruel
Than any ruin it may work on stone.
Time is a fire, and craves no sweeter fuel
Than lissom limb, clean blood, and virile bone.
You, who today are wind and bloom, tomorrow
Will be a dismal and decrepit thing;
And I too gouty and infirm to sorrow
That hands no longer burn, or warm lips cling.

Oh, grant me sorcery of words to fashion
A crypt of song to guard your loveliness,
Where you may come, some drear day when our passion
Has turned to kindliness, or something less,
And muse—half wistful, half incredulous:
"Was I so fair, and did he love me—thus!"

BOOKS ARE SO FULL OF LOVERS.

Books are so full of lovers and their ways—
The flickering pulse and breath, the urge of lips—
That one who must go lonely all his days
Had better fare the way of wind and ships
And let his quartos yellow on the shelf,
And let the worm and mould achieve their will . . .
Or take all Romeo's torment on himself,
And, reft of Romeo's peace, be frustrate still.

Oh, they are pestilent folk who write of lovers
Always, lacking wit for ruggeder things.
Better the wild, windy trail of the plovers,
The wheeling sky and the thrust of savage wings.
Better the bone's ache than the heart's, by far!
. . . *Fool, can you strike her face from leaf and star?*

SONG FOR A STERILE APRIL.

It is no cryptic or alchemic thing
That this old fever should have power afresh
To make me lie here sleepless, turn and thresh
Like any lad bemused with love and spring.
The old, inexorable currents swing
In sap and blood. The ancient coils enmesh
Larva and man. And I am only flesh,
And not exempt, for all my reasoning.

So it is just as well it should be you
To whom my futile hunger turns once more—
Better, indeed, that April's wind should blow
The old ache into flame than fire a new.
I need bear only what I bore before,
And wait for time's sure febrifuge of snow.

THE LOVELY AND MERCILESS ONE.

In other arms I found content. In yours
Only an infinite torment and unrest.
Always the chill surrender of your breast
Spurned me to madder quests, remoter lures.
Always I bore upon my soul the scars
Seared by the terrible magic of your kiss.
You were Circe . . . Helen . . . Semiramis,
Potent, austere, indifferent as the stars.

These bread-and-butter passions, cinnamon-sweet,
Have stayed my hunger for a little space.
Why must I blunder on reluctant feet
Back to the dead-sea fruit of your embrace?
Why must I nurse a marsh-fire in my grate,
And war with love more desolate than hate?

MASQUERADE.

You do not know me wholly. Never ask
To lift the smiling shell of my disguise.
Even should I consent your questing eyes
Would come no nearer than another mask.
Aye, if for love of you, I should permit
Your hands to strip me, husk on husk, away,
Until at last, triumphant, you might say,
"This—*this* is he, shorn of all counterfeit!"
And saying, shudder, wince—and turn aside
From the pale, cringing mockery I call
Myself—a thing to pity or deride—
Still would remain the last disguise of all:
The mask *I* dare not lift, lest it confess
Only a black abysm of nothingness.

DRIFTWOOD.

And so is ended all their valiant past
Who once were fellow madcaps with the gale.
How should these embers vision at the last
The cloud-flung spar, tall prow, and windy sail?
Yet even now the flames remember—dyed
Scarlet and jade and amber, fire and foam—
The sunset seas that knew their venturous pride,
The hush of starry dawns that bore them home.
These burn a little hour in requiem.
Oh, Love, draw near and watch their beauty die.
What if our argosies must follow them
To wrack and rot beneath an alien sky,
If our dead dreams may burn in jade and gold
To fend some other lovers from the cold!

SIN OF OMISSION.

Not the unshriven wrong or the unpaid debt
Here in the crumbling years is my worst regret—
Rather the memory of one joy wasted:
Of a stupid, youthful righteousness that reckoned
Too bloodlessly, and once, when wild love beckoned,
Fled, leaving the perilous sweet sin untasted.

FOUR WALLS FOR SOLACE.

The croon of black water over stone,
The cool flow of stars like ripened grain,
Though hearts crumble and rot and bleach as bone
These will remain.

The long pulse of the wind, the indolent laughter
Of aspens gossiping idly on a hill—
These will go their trivial way long after
Your sobs are still.

Tell this black sorrow to your pillow.
Whisper your despair to the shadowy glass.
But never go for sympathy to willow,
Or cloud, or grass.

Cry your lips dumb; you will not stir one leaf.
Not a wind will hearken you, or care.
But in a small room you may live with grief
Elsewhere too great to bear.

IV. OF MY OWN COUNTRY.

FARMERS.

FARMERS grow kindred to the soil they till,
One with the swart hills where their cornlands reach.
Granite is in their gaze, contained and still,
And the slow pulse of rivers in their speech.
They have their silences like those of loam
In winter, obdurate and indifferent.
They tread the land Antaeus-like, at home,
Fed from the turf, indomitable, content.

I cannot think of farmer folk apart
From the long acres where their slow shares creep.
They must be privy to the earth's dark heart;
Articulate in her councils. Even their sleep
Is like the sleep of frozen, fallow sod,
Warming to dim, great dreams of grain and God.

FORFEIT.

Now has another year of roses
Scattered its bright, ephemeral flame
Through river-bottom and arroyo
In the high country whence I came.

And I have never watched one petal
Blown like a frail and lyric word
Down the immutable emerald silence
Of forest aisles, unseen, unheard.

First the wild currant, then the rose,
Then aster, sunflower, golden-rod,
Moving in lovely, brief procession
To dark oblivion in the sod.

The fields are withered now to umber;
River and sky are ashen, chill;
Though still with reminiscent fires
The aspen kindles draw and hill.

There will be other years and roses;
Surely I shall return at last
And watch their dear, familiar magic
Moving in visible music past.

One twelve-month of my store—one summer—
Blown out like flame, beyond recall.
Why must I always think its blooming
Was somehow loveliest of all?

IT IS NOT WISE.

It is not wise to love too well
A certain square of leaf and loam,
A certain hillside's tawny swell,
Arbitrarily called home.

The river that you cleave apart
Today with hasty, heedless stride
May fling a coil about your heart
That you can never toss aside.

The aspen leaves that lift so thin
A web against the waning day
May weave a net to bind you in
Time cannot wither or tear away.

The hill you climb so laughingly,
Plundering all its meager lore,
May heap upon your memory
More weight of woe than Atlas bore.

A heart's a brittle thing at best,
And easily reft—as you may learn
Should yours be drawn to east or west,
Somewhere your feet may not return.

Oh, better far be wise and cold;
Go warily, nor pause too much,
Lest a mere cubicle of mould
Should take your life within its clutch.

Or give allegiance to the skies,
That you may ride the wind like foam
Yet only need to lift your eyes
For candle and hearth to light you home.

NOCTURNE IN SEPIA.

This hour is satin. Draw it round you
Prayerfully. Wear it while you may.
Let it soothe a heart too quickly
Bruised by the sackcloth garb of day.

Pity that hands as frail as pollen
Should have grown in toil so rough
They dare not fill their ache with twilight,
Fearing to rend its filmy stuff.

Be not afraid. It is your hour,
Wistful and reticent like you.
Grief has no sorcery to ravel
Its gossamer of dusk and dew.

Dip your fingers in it. Gather
Its cool fragrance to your cheek.
If your eyes are tired, close them,
And do not speak.

Silence will blow, like dead leaves, over you.
Silence, like snow, will heap you high.
Who knows? Time, returning
To claim his gift, may pass you by.

HIEROGLYPHS.

The wind is a half-word
The old gods whisper.
The stars are a blind script
None may ever read.
Why does a blown leaf
In a blue twilight
Teach us more philosophy
Than wise men will heed?

A BUILDER OF FIRES.

The tiniest fire, even,
  Is brighter far
Than the wide, glittering waste of heaven
  Heaped with star on star.
Though I have only ashes
  For my brief delight,
All the sky was jealous of me
  Many a night!

AUTUMN NOCTURNE.

It is no wind, but Time himself
Chording the leaves with savage fingers,
Till over all the hills a tumult
  Of dark, rebellious music lingers.

Threnody—nocturne—marche macabre
  Of resonant and ironic mirth—
At every mighty chord, like grace-notes,
  The brown leaves flicker down to earth.

Beauty and Time were ever ruthless.
  Why do I find it bitter and wrong
That life and leaf alike pay forfeit
  For one brief hour of song?

AUTUMN PASTELS.

LEAVES.

The year is an old hag.
Look, how she has rouged her cheeks
And carmined her lips
And donned a flaming gown
To deceive us.
But see, behind the scarlet
The yellow of decay,
And under the crimson fabric
The bony gauntness of decrepitude.

SUNSET.

The West—
A field of wind-swept wheat
That the great scythe of darkness
Is reaping.

SNOWFALL.

I did not understand
Till in my hand I crushed this snow-flake,
How Life, too, breaks and cripples
The starry patterns of Eternity.

V. FINALITIES.

LAUGHTER.

Laughter is a dread, and a bitter, and a beautiful thing.
Laughter is a Promethean fire filched from the gods and wielded against them to their destruction.
When a man laughs he is something more than a man—
A little taller, perhaps;
Or a bit more mad.

There was a man who went to the wilderness for a home,
Building a cabin, grubbing out brush, breaking sod.
The first year drouth withered his grain and parched his meadows.
Plague came the twelve-month after, and his cattle were bone-pricked carcasses and a stench on the wind.
And in the third year there was hail.
Out of the green windrows of that cruel mowing
He lifted grimed fists to heaven
And laughed . . .
Laughed . . .
As he shouted:
"God! Listen to me, God, I'm telling you!
I'll beat you yet!"

There was a woman who looked on the mangled body of her firstborn—
Blood and dust, a thing that had kissed her an hour ago,
And would rot soon.
She laughed—
Great ragged gasps of laughter, ripping her throat, flailing her scrawny shoulders, until breath failed her, and she slept.
And the echo of that laughter . . .
When the guns speak, and the sky is red with the wreckage of a dynasty, and fat things squeal and die . . .
You will hear it.

Men watching a dream crumble into rubble and a spatter of slimy foam;
Men finding out the perfidy of someone they have loved;

Men learning that the tools with which they have sought to
hew out new gods can compass only snow-men;
I have heard these laugh:
The laugh of the brave man who struggles up out of defeat to
fight again;
The laugh of the wise man who knows that bravery is futile;
And the laugh of the idiot who is wiser than both, having died
while they yet live.

Laughter is a dread, and a bitter, and a beautiful thing.
Take heed, Zeus!
We have forged of your own barb a spade that shall topple
Olympus!

THE BELIEVER.

He cursed the clinging bonds of flesh
  That took such bitter toll
And held within a cankering mesh
  The thing he called his soul.

He deemed life's ardent, earthy kiss—
  All beauty—all desire—
Thongs, holding him from other bliss
  Heaven on heaven higher.

And death was but a somber dawn
  Soon burgeoning into rose.
I mocked him. Now that he is gone
  I wonder what he knows.

EPHEMERA.

HERE they have raised a shaft of granite
Beside the gray, impassive river,
A slender phrase of bronze and stone.
For here, in years long dimmed and gone,
Men fought and died beside the river
For an old myth of pride and glory,
And here they carved the myth in stone
That other men might know their story
And keep their dream alight forever.

The winds of many a dark November
Have set their teeth upon the granite,
And the myth they reared in stone
Who bothers longer to remember?
Glory and pride and myth are gone,
And in a little sheaf of days
The stone will lie forgotten, broken.
There will be other men to raise
New myths of wonder and amaze
Beside the reticent gray river,
To hew their dreams in bronze and granite
Till they are dust that leaves no token.

And the gray, ironic river
Will watch them pass as others passed,
Myth upon brighter myth, at last—
Prophet and oracle unheard—
Sinking to dust that none remembers,
Save the gray, impassive river
That sees them pass, and has no word.

THE PLACE OF THE WATERS.

HERE in the end, to the place of the wind and the waters,
All that is flesh or dream of the flesh will come.
All of the roads of the world at the last turn hither
When the singing feet are weary, and the lips are numb.
We are young now; we are gay. It does not matter.
We too shall come.

Glorious women with white, rebellious faces
Tossed like foam on the heave of the sullen sea,
Crying in vain revolt at the slow, relentless
Beat of the whelming winds of eternity
That pound their pitiful beauty into oblivion—
I have seen them go. I know what the end must be.

Dominant men, the iron of heart, the defiant,
Building a fame to challenge the heedless sky,
Rearing a tower of triumph, a dream in granite
To mock at time and fling decay the lie . . .
The cold waves crumble and sap and gulf them under.
Slowly, aye—but surely as we, they die.

Pale-browed priests, wide-eyed with a valiant vision,
Mouthing of God and a life that defies the tomb,
Stand rapt-faced on the edge of the flying waters,
Dream of a dawn and a peace outlasting doom.
The gray cold breakers swallow their prayer into silence,
And the dream in their eyes is drowned in the leprous spume.

Beauty and fame and faith—they are one forever,
One with the fretted foam and the wind and the spray;
All of their loves and deeds and dreams forgotten
In the gray crush of the fog, and the water's gray;
All of their glory mute in the crying silence . . .
We shall be mute tomorrow, even as they.

Oh, there is time for us yet—good time for singing,
And wine, and games, and the white delirium
Of the kiss in the night. But ever across our laughter
An echo falls like a sword, and we are dumb.
The voice of the water speaks. Our hearts make answer:
We come!

STAY-AT-HOME SONNETS.

I. MAPS.

I had no use for mezzotint or oil
When I was younger. Maps were better far
To splash your walls with color, and uncoil
Prismatic roads to Ind and Zanzibar.
Windows may frame a dung-heap, or a line
Of laundry jigging drunkenly; but these
Were casements opening wide to winds like brine,
Cormorant-pinioned winds from perilous seas.

I have torn down my maps, and burned, or sown
Their lying colors on the lying wind.
They cannot cheat me now, since I have known
The arduous roads to Zanzibar and Ind,
And found those lands of spurious jade and flame
As drab and drear as that from which I came.

II. LARIAT.

Once the horizon was a lariat,
Obedient to the cunning of my wrist.
And swaggeringly, the arrogant autocrat
Of an arena world, I made it twist
A tilting wheel of sinuous necromancy
Round heels and head, while, debonair and proud,
I vaulted out or in as pleased a fancy
Half tipsy with the plaudits of the crowd.

My craft has fled me now. The stubborn rope
Snarls in mid-air, goes awkwardly asprawl.
And the horizon that my urgent hope
Claimed for its toy has grown much like a wall,
Except, reata-like, it tightens fast,
To strangle me inexorably at last.

III. PLOUGH THE ROAD UNDER.

Plough the road under, and nail fast the gate.
Let there be tillage where the wheels cut deep.
Lay spur and saddle by. The year grows late,
And meager time is left to sow and reap.
The share will peel the sanded ruts asunder
Until no devious clue remains to chart
How I rode forth in quest of love and plunder,
And how returned, pauper in purse and heart.

Plough deep, and harrow well, and seed it thickly.
Earth, stubbornly remembering, may reveal
This year, perhaps, by twin rows dwarfed and sickly,
The sterile heritage of hoof and wheel.
Not long, though. Earth forgets. Her old scars swell
New harvests now. And may not mine as well?

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